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Research Challenges

Bollo, Sofia

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Asia and Europe
University of Zurich
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CH-8001 Zurich

Editors

Prof. Dr. David Chiavacci, Prof. Dr. Raji C. Steineck, PD Dr. Simone Müller, lic. phil. Roman Benz, lic. phil. Nathalie Marseglia

English Language Editor

Dr. des. Phillip Lasater

Articles by

Aline von Atzigen, M.A.
Research and teaching assistant (social and cultural anthropology) at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich
Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Behr
Professor of Chinese Studies, University of Zurich, and Academic Director of the Doctoral Program Asia and Europe
Roman Benz, lic. phil.
Academic associate at the URPP Asia and Europe
Dr. Natalie Böhrer
Postdoctoral researcher (film studies) at the Department of Film Studies, University of Zurich
Dr. des. Sofia Bollo
Postdoctoral researcher (East Asian art history), former doctoral candidate at the URPP Asia and Europe

Dr. des. Ulrich Brandenburg
Research and teaching assistant (Islamic studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich
Laura Castro Royo, M.A.
Doctoral candidate (art history) at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich
Prof. Dr. David Chiavacci
Academic Director of the URPP Asia and Europe / Professor of Japanese Studies, University of Zurich
Dr. Kiu-wai Chu
Postdoctoral fellow in Chinese arts and culture, Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture, Western Sydney University
Julia Escher, M.A.
Research and teaching assistant (Chinese studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich
Fynn Holm, M.A.
Research and teaching assistant (Japanese studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich
Dr. des. Eliza Isabaeva
Postdoctoral researcher (social and cultural anthropology), former doctoral candidate at the URPP Asia and Europe
Henna Keski-Mäenpää, B.A.
M.A. student (art history) at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich
PD Dr. Simone Müller
Lecturer (Japanology) and executive manager URPP Asia and Europe
Elika Palenzona-Djalili, lic. phil.
Doctoral candidate (Islamic studies) at the

Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, and at the URPP Asia and Europe

Prof. Dr. R. Ramakumar
NABARD Chair Professor and Dean of the School of Development Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Dr. Olga Serbaeva Saraogi
Postdoctoral researcher (Indian studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich

Prof. Dr. Raji C. Steineck
Academic Director of the URPP Asia and Europe / Professor of Japanology, University of Zurich

Prof. Dr. Hans B. Thomsen
Professor of East Asian Art History, University of Zurich

Dr. James Weaver
Senior teaching and research assistant (Islamic studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich

Dr. des. Helena Wu
Research and teaching assistant (Chinese studies) at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich

Cover

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Nathalie Marseglia (pp. 3, 41–43), Roman Benz (p. 14), Hans B. Thomsen (p. 10), Helena Wu (p. 25), Moser Familienmuseum Charlottenfels, Neuhausen am Rheinfall, Switzerland (p. 37)



Symposium participants examining *katagami* at the State Archives of the Canton Aargau

Museum of Bern. Laura Palicova, a MA student from the KGOA who participated in the Bern project, also presented at the symposium. Another KGOA student, Alessandra Lardelli, presented her discovery of a collection

of *bingata katagami*, stencils created for the *bingata* textiles of the Ryukyu Kingdom (present-day Okinawa) in the collection of Museum der Kulturen in Basel, which then became the subject of her MA thesis. It also was the subject of

a KGOA class in August 2017, featuring Professor Yoshikuni Yanagi of the Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts, also a member of the Zurich symposium. A number of KGOA students remain involved in *katagami*-related projects, and a major publication is being planned, featuring essays for the leading scholars on the stencils, from both Japan and the West.

The KGOA's *katagami* project aims to foster interest in young scholars and curators from across Europe and from Japan, who are starting to study these objects. We hope to show that, although Japanese woodblock prints are often given sole credit for the reception of Japanese art in the West, the *katagami* at a time held equally important roles as transmitters of Japanese art and design. The KGOA hopes to resurrect the roles, the reception, and the history of these objects through events such as the Zurich symposium.

Research Challenges

In the spring semester 2016, the workshop “Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Research Projects” (May 10–11, 2016) took place at the University of Zurich, organized by Dorothea Lüddeckens and Nina Rageth.

Sofia Bollo

Take eleven doctoral candidates based in Switzerland, Germany and Armenia, who work in disciplines ranging from anthropology, study of religion, archaeology, museum studies, gender studies, and Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Add three experts on qualitative research, Elisabeth Arweck (University of Warwick), Marta Trzebiatowska (University of Aberdeen), Aymon Kreil (University of Zurich). Weigh research doubts and mix them with the obstacles of doing fieldwork, making sure to be

open for dialogue. The result is a fruitful context for analysing and discussing specific methodological and ethical challenges in qualitative research, with the goal of finding practical solutions to be applied in the respective doctoral projects.

The workshop started with a lecture by Elisabeth Arweck, who presented her vast expertise on qualitative research. Using examples from her own research projects, she offered her perspective and experience in dealing with important issues, such as finding a suitable object of research and facing challenges related to context. She also shared insights on methodological approaches, sample practices, path determination, gathering of participants and access to the field. Arweck also introduced the crucial

discussion on ethics and on the emotional part of doing research.

Marta Trzebiatowska presented her biographic story during her qualitative research projects. Being of Polish origin and having studied Catholic Polish nuns for her doctoral dissertation, she identified several key issues with which a researcher is faced during the course of fieldwork. The issues she addressed were the vulnerability of a researcher in the field, the problem of being a ‘hostage’ of the field, and the difficulties in forming relationships with informants. Trzebiatowska described how she dealt with conditional access to her field and with the constant questioning of one’s own place in it, explaining how fieldwork is made up of power relations. There are good tools and methods for operating in the field. Yet lack of control, as well as emotional and physical vulnerability, are sometimes inevitable. From her past projects, she learned that developing a deeper understanding of

the field can turn emotional hardship into greater reflexivity.

Aymon Kreil also shared his experiences on imbalanced power relations in the field of research. In addition, he explained how, during fieldwork, the researcher must occasionally make decisions within seconds, while still considering ethical issues, cultural appropriateness, and cultural politeness. He believed that every problem encountered during fieldwork has to be considered as element of study rather than as obstacle. When introduced to families of the deceased, for example, the difficulties of blending in the field is indeed part of the data to be collected.

To prepare for the workshop, doctoral researchers were asked to create a 10-minute presentation to address their own methodological challenges. The aim of these presentations was to clarify both for other participants and for ourselves our own research problems and failures. In an opposite trend against common tasks of presenting a research project at the best of it, in this session, the clearer you could set out your research complications, the more successful you were. This exercise was extremely important, since the goal of the workshop was not to generally discuss what kind of problems one might usually encounter in qualitative research, rather to collect and inductively organize actual problems raised by the PhD candidates and seek solutions to them. After the eleven presentations, an overwhelming amount of methodological difficulties emerged. However, the session ended with a reassuring awareness that, even if operating in different disciplines, researchers often face common problems in their projects.

The workshop's second day started with a roundtable discussion, aimed to sum up and classify the various problems that had been identified the day before. The challenges were chronologically ordered along the usual research path, from the initial stage of fieldwork towards the final steps of the

doctoral project. Using flip chart paper sheets, the workshop participants grouped research problems into several categories and subcategories. The six identified areas were the following: 1. covert/overt fieldwork; 2. the problem of inside/outside; 3. language barriers; 4. ethics; 5. data analysis; 6. dissemination/publication of data.

Discussing some categories of problems

In detail, the first category of problems named *covert/overt fieldwork* included challenges of the researcher's behaviour during fieldwork, a back stage or front stage attitude, the gender issue, the topic of intrusive fieldwork, and rapport issue connected with sensitive problems. The *inside/outside* problem also dealt with fieldwork approaches, with doing anthropology at home and juggling aspects of the researcher's identity, with blind spots, stress in the field, and cultural conventions. In the *language barriers* we discussed how to adapt and talk to different audiences during data collection, how to change the register of languages and how to face different understanding of particular terms or notions in data analysis and translation. The challenge of *ethics* focused on the ethical conventions in research, on ethics used as a defence set up by the field, on ethics as an excuse, on power imbalance between researchers and their interlocutors, and on the power of actors in the field. The *data analysis* category included a broad range of issues ranging from how to make sense of interview post-data collection, how to assess the weight and validity of collected data, how to deal with uneven data and different response rates, how to go about transcribing interviews, how to treat informal knowledge when e.g. a tape recorder is turned off during or after an interview, how to deal with non-verbal communication including emotions, as well as with secrets, rumours, and lies. In the *dissemination/publication* category we discussed the observance of data ano-

nymity in the writing process, loyalties towards one's interlocutors, whether and how to pay back participants, confidentiality, and finally publication issues in view of career perspectives.

After a detailed discussion pertaining to each of the challenges listed, the participants could choose one of the six categories of problems to focus on more deeply. An even closer and more intimate debate took place within smaller groups of students concerned with similar challenges. Sharing personal experiences and exchanging solutions was often eye-opening and informative for others facing similar questions. After the close discussion, each group had to choose two specific unsolved challenges within the category, which needed further discussion in the final roundtable. The most problematic issues were then re-addressed in the presence of the whole group and approached always with emphasis on linking the problem to the context of the specific research, to the project characteristics, and to the research questions. Everyone could eventually receive individual advice and practical tips on how to solve his or her problems and how to proceed in the doctoral project.

The final feedback discussion involved each participant feeling more confident and stronger in the previously problematic area. By honestly and openly sharing problems, it was possible to find solutions, and not just general ones, but personalized answers fashioned to the needs of the specific problems presented. The workshop ended with positive feelings. Each participant felt encouraged and incentivised, more confident in making decisions in his or her research and in combining methods with more awareness. Sitting down and reflecting together on research challenges proved to be very productive, more so than just praising positive achievements. But in the case of this workshop, success has to be fully acknowledged.